

## PRACTICING LOVE

UCC colleague Kate Huey reminds us that,

This week's passage is only one small piece of a conversation we're overhearing, between Jesus and the religious authorities of his own people. It's a little bit like listening in on a family argument, but with higher stakes.

Let's also remember where we are in the overall story. Following his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, Jesus immediately "cleansed" the temple and then entered into a series of confrontations with religious leaders who questioned his authority and, as we heard last week, sought to entrap him. Although following Mark's chronology, Matthew shapes this particular exchange differently. Whereas Mark has a friendly scribe pose the question and following Jesus' answer the scribe replies, "You are right..." Matthew changes the character of the exchange so that it is much more of a controversy story. Luke, by the way, places the story in an entirely different context prior to Jesus' arrival in Jerusalem. Rather than a friendly scribe, Matthew a "lawyer" - which we should understand as a "professional theologian" - ask the question: "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?"

Again, Matthew adds a subtle details absent from Mark: "in the law" whereas in Mark the question is simply, "Which commandment is the first of all?" Perhaps this is another trick on the part of the Pharisees. The rabbis had counted a total of 613 commands which they viewed as equally binding - I mean, how can mere humans think they can "rank" God's commands? Some fell in the category of "moral law"; others were "ceremonial law." Any attempt to answer what may appear to us to be a relatively safe question was bound to lead to trouble.

This wasn't a question Jesus could easily side step. Let us remember that it was Jesus who said in the Sermon on the Mount "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets." What Jesus does do turn the question on its head, answering not with a ranking but a two-fold unified command that declares that loving God and neighbor is the key to understanding what God is up to. "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." Where Matthew may have dropped out one element that Mark reports "and with all your strength" the point is clear - it's like the Hokey Pokey, you've got to put your whole self into loving God. And you've got to love your neighbor, which Jesus has already expanded to include even our enemies.

That's a tough charge. Where do we begin? One place to begin is how we understand "love" in Jesus' command. That's an odd request when you stop to think about. How can you be "commanded" to love? If love is forced is it real love? How can we love someone if we don't "feel" loving towards them? Love, in our modern way of thinking, has become something so aligned with feeling that we may forget that there is whole other aspect to it and that is commitment.

In scripture, and in the life of faith, love isn't something driven by feeling. It is something we choose to do; a way we choose to live our lives. Like God's love for us, it is a love that there through thick and thin; it is a love that extends even when we don't feel very loving. It is love that reflects the covenant love, the steadfast love of God. In this sense, it is love as both commitment and action. Lutheran pastor Clayton Schmid puts it this way:

The key problem in interpreting this double commandment for our time is that we lose sight of the biblical meaning of love. Our culture has equated love with intense emotion. To love is a stronger response than to like. And, both are measures of a passive response to something outside us.

We like chocolate: we cannot help ourselves. We love a movie: it entertains or moves us. We love a boy or girlfriend: they make us happy. We love a spouse: they complete us.

But, biblical love is not passive and it is not strictly emotional... It is not something that occurs to us without our control or will. Biblical love is something we do. It is loving-kindness, merciful action that is both generous and continuous. Herein is the good news for Christian people. To love neighbor as oneself is to act toward the other as one would act toward those close to you. We treat the stranger as well as we treat those that we love emotionally.

This sort of love takes practice – a lifetime's worth. I don't know about you, but I look at some folks and am envious because their ability to love and be gracious to all seems to come so naturally. Whereas I will openly admit that there are people I have to actively work at loving, for some folks love seems to come as easily as breathing. My seminary colleague Audrey West makes an interesting connection between how we learn to love as Jesus commands and what we know of what makes an accomplished musician. She points to a 1993 study by Anders Ericsson, a cognitive psychologist,

who published a paper that examined distinctions among piano students of differing abilities, including those who performed at elite levels and those who were merely average. Among his findings were results suggesting that the key difference between a musician capable of performing at Carnegie Hall and one who just plays locally is the quality and quantity of practice.

Here, I am thinking of the words of every music teacher I ever had the pleasure to study with: practice makes perfect. Audrey goes on to note that

Since then, Ericsson's results have been both challenged and fine-tuned, as scientists have taken a closer look at elements of performance in music, athletics, language acquisition, and so on. As it turns out, things like memory, physical characteristics, the age of learning certain skills, and even how people deal with their mistakes can contribute to higher achievement. Nonetheless, repetition and careful practice remain critical elements.

One of the most important places we practice loving is in the community of the church. When we gather regularly for worship, we practice loving God with our entire being with all our senses, with the full depth of our being. We learn and re-learn about God's unwavering love for us and little by little we learn to surrender ourselves into the arms of a loving, forgiving, gracious God. We also learn to love others – even folks we may not particularly like – because we choose to do so – because we are called to do so. This isn't just something pastor do – all Christians engage in this practice. And the church is the judgment-free zone where we are can practice loving knowing that we can make mistakes – we can totally blow it at times and there will be grace and forgiveness.

It's not always easy. When I'm practicing the banjo and trying to learn a new piece I often make the mistake of trying to play it too fast and trying to take the whole thing on at once. I think at times we do the same thing with our aspirations for faithful loving – looking for grand gestures that will somehow demonstrate that we have mastered the subject. But you've got to take it slow and in small steps. As in music, you've got to break down into measures or just a few notes, or sometimes just one note and keep working at it, little by little, encounter by encounter. Benjamin Zander, Musical Director of the Boston Philharmonic Orchestra, shares this childhood remembrance in *The Art of Possibility*:

I am reminded of a dispiriting moment in a cello lesson with my teacher, Mr. Herbert Withers. He was eighty-three years old, and I was eleven. I had tried to play a passage, but I couldn't make it work. I tried again, and it didn't work, and a third time, and I was no more successful. I remember making a frustrated grimace and putting down my bow. The elderly Mr. Withers leaned over to me and whispered, "What? You've been practicing it for three minutes, and you still can't play it?"

There is a saying at Oberlin's Woodshed Lesson Studio, "The Woodshed is where you go to work things out." It is a place where folks try out new ideas or a piece their working on before they go to perform it somewhere. The church is the place where we work out how to love God and neighbor. Audrey West reminds us:

Exactly what love looks like in a given context may differ, but the calling remains the same. In Matthew Jesus tends to the needs of whoever is most vulnerable, making visible the invisible and moving the marginalized directly to the center. Whether he encounters them in houses or in public squares, in the backwoods or the temple precincts, on the road or in villages, desperate for safety or for healing, Jesus meets them where they are and brings the healing power of God. His ministry embodies the love of God.

Do you want to know how to love God with your whole self? Practice loving your neighbor. Do you want to know how to love your neighbor? Practice loving God. Repeat. Then do it again.

Today, I give thanks for the loving community that is First Church a fellowship where we can practice love of God and neighbor – where our at times bumbling and fumbling attempts are accepted as part and parcel of the life of faith we are all attempting to practice. AMEN.